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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
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**Live From the Front: Operational Ramifications of Military Web Logs in Combat  
Zones**

**by**

**Paul R. Keyes**

**Lieutenant Commander, USN**

**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

**10 MAY 2007**

## **Abstract**

### *Live From the Front: Operational Ramifications of Military Web Logs in Combat Zones*

Military web logs (online journals written by service members serving in combat zones) began appearing on the Internet shortly after the start of OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM. Their first-hand accounts of action on the front lines provide the public with a perspective that cannot be gained from the mainstream media. Their instantaneous nature and widespread reach create unique operational concerns not experienced with other forms of communication. This paper examines these operational concerns, particularly focusing on operational security, while also examining the positive aspects of military web logs. Legal implications and the military's efforts to manage risks associated with military web logs are discussed. Using parallels found in civilian web logs, business sector web log management techniques are discussed as they relate to military web logs. Finally, the paper concludes that military leaders must allow a permissive military web log environment, framed with sound operational security guidance and training, if they are to leverage the benefits that military web logs can provide to the operational commander.

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Milblog Phenomenon – What is the scope of the issue?	3
Personal Communication From the Battlefield - same as ever...but different	4
Milblogs Impact on Military Operations	6
Milblogs' Positive Effects	8
The First Amendment and the Military	10
Military Instructions That Address Millogging	11
Options for Military Commanders	13
Analysis	17
Recommendations and Conclusion	19
Bibliography	22



## ***Introduction***

Anbar Province, Iraq. His patrol complete, Corporal Jennings returned to the forward operating base with two less soldiers in his team than he started with earlier in the day. During the patrol, a roadside bomb detonated near his Humvee and instantly killed his best friend in the platoon. The other soldier, with the team for only two days, was not so lucky. Agonizing screams drowned out the engine noise as the medic desperately tried to save the new recruit's life during the frantic thirty-minute drive back to camp. He died just before they reached the gate.

Once he filed his after action report, Corporal Jennings willed his exhausted body over to the camp's Internet kiosk to continue his daily ritual. Mentally and physically drained, he mustered enough energy to recount the details of the day's events to inform those back home on the war's progress. In his mind, this was a duty as solemn as the one he took an oath to uphold when he enlisted.

And so he sat down to write his military web log...

A military web log,<sup>1</sup> or milblog for short, is a personal web site where a service member keeps a periodic journal or diary of his or her wartime views and experiences. Many milblogs include photographs, videos, and hyperlinks to other web logs and websites.

Since the American Revolution, U.S. service members have written back home to tell their stories of life on the battlefield. Unlike letters, or even email addressed to specific individuals, milblogs have the potential to have an immediate and substantial impact on a global audience. Armed only with a story to tell and a computer connected to the Internet, the American fighting man or woman can become an amateur war correspondent.

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<sup>1</sup> Commander, Multi-National Corps – Iraq, Policy # 9 – Unit and Soldier Owned and Maintained Websites (Baghdad, Iraq: Headquarters Multi-National Corps – Iraq, 6 April 2005), 1.

While Corporal Jennings' milblog entry may have an impact on the American public's opinion of the war, it has the potential to have even greater operational implications for the conduct of future military operations.

Blogs written about the military do not have to be written by personnel in the armed forces to have an operational impact. However, since military commanders can directly impact only blogs written by people under their command, this paper will concern itself only with service member-generated blogs (milblogs).

Milblogs are a subset of the greater category of blogs (regardless of subject) and have similar characteristics. The important parallels and lessons that can be learned from the civilian sector's management of blogs will be also discussed.

This paper will briefly examine the phenomenon of milblogs, discussing the scope of the issue facing military commanders. It will then examine operational concerns of milblogs' potential negative effects. Positive aspects of milblogs are then addressed. Next, legal implications and the military's efforts to manage risks associated with military web logs are examined. Using parallels found in civilian blogs, business sector web log management techniques are discussed as they relate to military web logs. The paper will conclude that although Operational Security (OPSEC)<sup>2</sup> concerns are paramount to Commanders' decisions to allow milblogs in their command, they should not discount the positive influence milblogs can have on highlighting military successes not reported by the media. Military leaders must allow a permissive military web log environment, framed with sound operational

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<sup>2</sup> Operations security is "a process of identifying critical information... [to] determine indicators that adversary intelligence systems might obtain that could be interpreted or pieced together to derive critical information in time to be useful to adversaries." Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Operations Security, Joint Publication (JP) 3-13.3 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 29 June 2006), GL-4.

security guidance and training, if they are to leverage the benefits that military web logs can provide to the operational commander.

### ***Milblog phenomenon – What is the scope of the issue?***

According to Technorati, a web log tracking Internet site, civilian and military web logs numbered 75.2 million in April 2007. There are over 175,000 new web logs created each day. Approximately 1.6 million web log entries are added to the blogosphere<sup>3</sup> (the online community of web logs) every 24 hours, equating to 18 new entries per second.<sup>4</sup> With the first public web logs appearing in 1999, this explosion took only eight years to develop. The web log phenomenon is showing no sign of slowing down.<sup>5</sup>

Milblogs, as a subset of the information explosion on the Internet, have characteristics similar to the larger web log phenomenon. In 2001, coinciding with the start of OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM, milblogs began appearing on the Internet as service members found a new medium with which to relate their battlefield experiences.<sup>6</sup> Milblogging.com (created in 2005 after its founder returned from a deployment to Afghanistan) lists 1,710 milblogs on its website as of May 2007.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note that not all web logs are created equal. Research conducted by Perseus, an enterprise feedback management firm, shows that “66 per cent of blogs have not

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<sup>3</sup> “The notion of a blogosphere is an important one for understanding blogs. Blogs by themselves are simply the published text of an author’s thoughts, but the authors read and comment on others’ blogs, link to them and cite them. These relationships between blogs comprise a shifting Internet-wide social and cultural network.” – Wikipedia.org “Blogosphere,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogosphere> (accessed 22 April 2007). For an in-depth discussion of the history of web logs see Wikipedia.org, “Blog,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web\\_logs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_logs).

<sup>4</sup> Technorati.com, “Technorati, About Us,” <http://www.technorati.com/about/> (accessed 22 April 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Clancy Ratliff, “Blogs, Blogging, and Bloggers,” Culturecat.net, <http://culturecat.net/files/ReviewEssay.pdf> (accessed 23 April 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Matthew C. Burden, *The Blog of War: Front Line Dispatches from Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Milblogging.com, “The Story of Milblogging.com,” <http://www.milblogging.com/about.php> (accessed 6 May 2007).

been updated in the past two months. It describes more than a million blogs as one-day wonders (with no follow-up postings).”<sup>8</sup> In fact, most web logs are actually never read. As noted by business analysts Ronald Aronica and Mtetwa Ramdoo, “It’s interesting to note that most bloggers give up after a few rounds. Sure they can put their blogs out for millions to read, but *most* blogs have an interesting statistic: Comments = 0.”<sup>9</sup>

However, it is not wise to dismiss blogs according to online public relations account director Graham Lee who said, “Lots of blogs have a small readership, but if a story has some weight it can be picked up very quickly.”<sup>10</sup> An obscure blog can gain a significant amount of influence in a short amount of time. In 2003, “Instapundit” was a mostly unknown political blog by University of Tennessee law professor Glenn Reynolds. By 2007 it had grown to become one of the mostly widely read U.S. web logs.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Personal communication from the battlefield - same as ever...but different***

As stated in the introduction above, U.S. service members have always corresponded with those back home while they were away fighting the country’s wars. The U.S. military has always done its part to enable this critical communication link. Victory mail (microfilming of letters) was developed during World War II in an attempt to facilitate the enormous amount of personal letter mail sent between the battlefield or ships at sea and the homeland.<sup>12</sup> Since inception in 1925, the Military Affiliate Radio System (MARS) primarily conducted official communications, but also provided service members with the morale-enhancing

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<sup>8</sup> *PR Week*, “Blog Myths Exposed.” *PR Week*, 9 February 2007, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/printdoc> (accessed 6 April 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Aronica and Mtetwa Ramdoo, *The World is Flat?: A Critical Analysis of Thomas L. Friedman’s New York Times Bestseller* (Tampa, FL: Meghan-Kiffer Press, 2006), 38.

<sup>10</sup> “Blog Myths Exposed,” *PR Week*, 9 February 2007, 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> National Postal Museum, “V-Mail,” [http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2d2a\\_vmail.html](http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2d2a_vmail.html) (accessed 22 April 2007).

ability to make radio “phone-patch” calls from remote locations to persons in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Starting with the Vietnam War, the telephone increasingly was used to keep service members in touch with loved ones. As the popularity of email in the civilian sector increased during the 1990’s and early 2000’s, the military witnessed a similar increase in email sent home from those service members serving overseas.<sup>14</sup>

Although the military has always leveraged emerging civilian communications technology for official purposes, it has also allowed its members to use the same technology for keeping in touch with those back home. The emerging popularity of blogs and milblogs can be seen as a continuation of this relationship between up-and-coming technology and the desire for more efficient communications (both for civilians and military members alike).

There is, however, one aspect of milblogs that sets them apart from the other types of personal battlefield communications discussed above. Other forms of communication (telephone, letter mail, etc.) require the sender to push information to a specific individual or, in the case of e-mail, a finite group of individuals. Milblogs, on the other hand, are posted to the Internet and anyone can pull information from a milblogger’s website, including mainstream media outlets. In March 2004, the *Weekly Standard* remarked that “As the war enters a phase where most of the fighting is far removed from the networks’ cameras, it gets harder to find reliable news on the conflict’s many fronts. Unless you read milblogs, that is.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Central Kentucky Computer Solutions, “United States Army Military Affiliate Radio System,” <http://www.ckycs.com/kyarmymars/whatismars.htm> (accessed 22 April 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras, *CU @ the FOB: How The Forward Operating Base is Changing The Life of Combat Soldiers*, Strategic Studies Institute monograph (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), 8-9.

<sup>15</sup> Hugh Hewitt, “Rise of the Milblogs,” *WeeklyStandard.com*, 12 March 2004, [http://www.weeklystandard.com/Utilities/printer\\_preview.asp?idArticle=3840&R=11316365F7](http://www.weeklystandard.com/Utilities/printer_preview.asp?idArticle=3840&R=11316365F7) (accessed 22 April 2007)

The majority of milblogs are read only by a handful of people, usually close friends and family members who want to keep in touch with their service member.<sup>16</sup> These milblogs remain in relative obscurity on the Internet. However, a blog or a milblog can have explosive consequences when it resonates with the public and the media. As reported in *Foreign Policy* magazine, “Nobody knows [the importance of blogs] better than Trent Lott, who in December 2002 resigned as U.S. Senate majority leader in the wake of inflammatory comments he made at Sen. Strom Thurmond’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party. Initially, Lott’s remarks received little attention in the mainstream media. But the incident was the subject of intense online commentary, prodding renewed media attention that converted Lott’s gaffe into a full-blown scandal.”<sup>17</sup>

### ***Milblogs Impact on Military Operations***

Since anyone with a computer and Internet connectivity can view a milblog, the potential exists for milblogs to have quick and devastating negative effects. The private sector learned this lesson with blogs. Joel Cere, vice-president of the public relations giant Hill & Knowlton remarked, “The disgruntled employee... could ignite a full-blown crisis, much quicker and on a broader scale [than ever before].”<sup>18</sup> Uma G. Gupta, former president of Alfred State College experienced this with a disgruntled employee. A blog that characterized

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<sup>16</sup> Mark Memmott, “‘Milbloggers’ are typing their place in history,” *USAToday.com*, 11 May 2005, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2005-05-11-milblogs-main\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2005-05-11-milblogs-main_x.htm) (accessed 23 April 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Daniel W. Drezner and Henry Farrell, “Web of Influence,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 145 (November/December 2004): 33.

<sup>18</sup> *PR Week*, “Blogs Cast a Shadow,” *PR Week*, 1 July 2005, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/printdoc> (accessed 6 April 2007).

Ms. Gupta's leadership as "abysmal" and "incompetent" was online for only three months but created such commotion that she resigned her position.<sup>19</sup>

The military is not immune to similar problems with milblogs. A National Guardsman was punished for alleged OPSEC and Geneva Conventions violations because he posted pictures of detainees on his website.<sup>20</sup> Another Guardsman was demoted and fined for having classified information in his milblog.<sup>21</sup> A Major's milblog was ordered to be removed because he posted entries that detailed casualties he treated as a military doctor while in Mosul, Iraq.<sup>22</sup>

Others have been asked or ordered to have their material reviewed before posting due to concerns that they may be revealing information that could jeopardize themselves or other service members. Army Specialist Colby Buzzell, author of the popular milblog "My War" is one such example. His accounts of patrols were so detailed that commanders were concerned about the operational security of Army tactics. He was ordered to have his milblogs reviewed before posting them. Buzzell stopped milblogging while on active duty and removed many of his stories from his site.<sup>23</sup>

There has been at least one instance of a milblogger posting information that described how to exploit vulnerabilities at his base. Another placed personal information in his milblog that could have endangered his family.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Brock Read, "Attack of the Blog," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 15 September 2006, <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed 6 April 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Memmott, "'Milbloggers' are typing their place in history"

<sup>21</sup> Katherine C. Den Bleyker, "The First Amendment versus Operational Security: Where Should the Milblogging Balance Lie?" *Fordham Intellectual Property, Media & Entertainment Law Journal*, Winter 2007, <http://web/lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 6 April 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Memmott, "'Milbloggers' are typing their place in history"

<sup>24</sup> "Unit Monitors Web Sites, Blogs For Operational Security Issues," *National Guard* 60, no. 11 (November 2006): 41.

### *Milblogs' Positive Effects*

Not all blogs, or milblogs, are cause for concern, however. According to Dr. Leonard Wong, a research professor in the Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College, there have not been any significant milblog OPSEC violations that have caused decisively negative impacts to U.S. military operations.<sup>25</sup> Business leaders are learning that personal employee blogs about their companies “that contain entries that are both positive and negative views toward the company tend to be seen as credible by the public.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the public often views the raw, unfiltered views of milbloggers as more credible than the mainstream media or official government press releases.<sup>27</sup>

In 2006, a study was conducted by the University of Oklahoma Department of Defense Joint Course in Communication to determine how milblogs depict the military. Extensive content analysis “revealed that milblogs are relatively neutral to mildly positive in terms of what they are communicating about the U.S. military.”<sup>28</sup> *Wired Magazine* reported that they found that “milbloggers tend to be gung-ho patriots, rather than disillusioned doves.”<sup>29</sup>

Troops often start milblogs to counter a perceived mainstream media failure to paint a fair picture of what is actually happening in the war zone.<sup>30</sup> For example, some milbloggers believed the media’s portrayal of violence prior to the 2005 Iraqi elections did not reflect

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<sup>25</sup> Nikki Schwab, “Blogs Chronicle War From Soldiers’ Perspectives,” *WashingtonPost.com*, 2 May 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/02/AR2007050202253.html> (accessed 9 May 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Michelle Delio, “The Enterprise Blogosphere,” *InfoWorld* 27, no. 13 (28 March 2005), <http://proquest.umi.com/> (accessed 29 March 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Bill Roggio, “The Value of a Pro-War Blogger’s Report From Iraq,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 December 2006, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1212/p09s01-codc.htm> (accessed 25 April 2007).; Jules Crrittenden, “U.S. Military Declares War on Blogs,” *Boston Herald*, 22 October 2006, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/bostonherald/access/1149498431.html> (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Bruce Anderson et al., “Don’t Tread on My Blog: A Study of Military Web Logs,” (research paper, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, DOD Joint Course in Communications 06A, 2006), 37, <http://www.ou.edu/deptcomm/dodjcc/groups/06A/index.html> (accessed 23 April 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Xení Jardin, “Under Fire, Soldiers Kill Blogs,” *Wired.com*, 29 October 2006, <http://www.wired.com/print/politics/law/news/2006/10/72026> (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Memmott, “‘Milbloggers’ are typing their place in history”

what was happening on the ground. Florida National Guard Captain Jason Van Steenwyk, a milblogger, saw the media focusing on negative stories while “the soldier blogs were pretty optimistic. The people who weren’t surprised when the elections went off as well as they did were the soldiers and the Iraqi people.”<sup>31</sup>

Others, like “Greyhawk” from the popular Mudville Gazette milblog, played a role in correcting comments made by Eason Jordan, the senior CNN executive who alleged that members of the military were targeting reporters on the battlefield. The absence of critical reflection on Jordan’s comments by the mainstream media did not sit well with “Greyhawk” and other milbloggers. Some key bloggers and milbloggers investigated the incident and concluded that “Iraq-based reporters disputed Jordan’s claim.” Shortly after, Eason retracted his statement and resigned.<sup>32</sup>

As a leading milblogger, Matthew Currier Burder, founder of the popular Blackfive.net milblog stated, “There is a lot of positive information coming from these 1,200 or so military blogs, and if it’s not positive, [then] it’s giving people a better understanding of what it’s like to be a soldier or the family member of a soldier fighting this war.”<sup>33</sup>

Some milblogs counter conventional wisdom and provide balance to stories. Exit polls at the 2006 U.S. midterm elections indicated that the majority of the public was not satisfied with the U.S. prosecution of the Iraq War, with the bipartisan Iraq Study Group describing it as “grave and deteriorating.” However, as the *Christian Science Monitor* noted in a December 2006 article, “But for those who troll the blogosphere for news, there is a

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> John Hockenberry, “The Blogs of War,” *Wired.com*, [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.08/milblogs\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.08/milblogs_pr.html) (accessed 25 April 2007).; Howard Kurtz, “CNN’s Jordan Resigns Over Iraq Remarks,” *WashingtonPost.com*, 12 February 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A17462-2005Feb11.html> (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Xeni Jardin, “Under Fire, Soldiers Kill Blogs,” *Wired.com*, 29 October 2006, <http://www.wired.com/print/politics/law/news/2006/10/72026> (accessed 25 April 2007).

distinctly different view of the Iraq war available. In this version, the United States is winning the war on the battlefield.”<sup>34</sup>

### ***The First Amendment and the Military***

How do U.S. courts view milblogs? To date, there are no known milblog-related cases that have been tried in U.S. courts.<sup>35</sup> To understand how the United States judiciary may view milbloggers’ First Amendment right to freedom of speech, similar First Amendment cases must be examined.

In *United States v. Priest* (1972), a service member was punished by the military for publishing an on-base underground newspaper that protested military involvement in Vietnam. The Court upheld Priest’s punishment, stating “the military was well within its authority to punish a single serviceman for publishing his criticism of the armed forces because such words could lead to larger dissent within the troops.”<sup>36</sup>

*Brown v. Glines* (1980) was brought to the Supreme Court to decide if a service member had the right under the First Amendment to distribute petitions on base without prior chain-of-command approval. Air Force Captain Glines drafted and solicited support from other service members to petition the Secretary of Defense and Congress for a redress of grievances against certain military regulations. The Court found in favor of the military because a service member’s freedom of speech “yields somewhat to meet certain overriding demands of discipline and duty.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Bill Roggio, “The Value of a Pro-War Blogger’s Report From Iraq,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 December 2006, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1212/p09s01-codc.htm> (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>35</sup> Bleyker, “The First Amendment versus Operational Security: Where Should the Milblogging Balance Lie?”

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

The U.S. Supreme Court has given the military wide latitude to restrict service member's freedom of speech in matters pertaining to national security and military effectiveness. However, the judiciary has also stated that there must be a "proper balance between the needs of the armed services and the right to speak out as a free American."<sup>38</sup>

### ***Military Instructions That Address Milblogging***

Within the legal framework of the aforementioned U.S. Supreme Court cases, the military has published instructions and directives that set guidelines for milblogs. In April 2005, Commander, Multi-National Corps – Iraq (MNC-I) issued guidance in Policy #9 directing all MNC-I personnel to register their milblogs with their respective unit chains-of-command.<sup>39</sup> Unit commanders, in turn, were required to periodically review these milblogs to ensure they did not contain "classified information, casualty information before next-of-kin has been [officially] notified, information protected by the Privacy Act, information regarding incidents under ongoing investigation, and For Official Use Only information."<sup>40</sup> MNC-I did not require each milblog entry to be cleared with the chain-of-command. This policy did not restrict the timeliness of milblog postings, but rather placed the requirement on the individual milblogger to ensure the milblog did not contain prohibited information. If the milblogger violated the order, he or she could have been subject to punishment under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Commander, Multi-National Corps – Iraq, Policy # 9 – Unit and Soldier Owned and Maintained Websites (Baghdad, Iraq: Headquarters Multi-National Corps – Iraq, 6 April 2005), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Commander, Multi-National Corps – Iraq, Policy # 9 – Unit and Soldier Owned and Maintained Websites (Baghdad, Iraq: Headquarters Multi-National Corps – Iraq, 6 April 2005), 3.; Mark Memmott, "'Milbloggers' are typing their place in history," *USAToday.com*, 11 May 2005, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2005-05-11-milblogs-main\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2005-05-11-milblogs-main_x.htm) (accessed 23 April 2007).

In August 2006, the Department of Defense (DOD) issued a record message titled “Information Security/Website Alert” directing that “personal blogs... may not contain information on military activities that is not available to the general public. Such information includes comments on daily military activities and operations, unit morale, results of operations, status of equipment, and other information that may be beneficial to adversaries.”<sup>42</sup> Additionally it stated that “no information may be placed on websites that are readily accessible to the public unless it has been reviewed for security concerns and approved in accordance with [DOD policy and procedures].”<sup>43</sup>

The Defense Science Board, a DOD advisory group, met in April 2006 to study the effect milblogs and other online tools can have on military readiness.<sup>44</sup> Subsequently, the U.S. Army published an updated OPSEC regulation, AR 530-1, on 19 April 2007. In the new instruction, the Army directed that all milbloggers “will... consult with their immediate supervisor and their OPSEC Officer for an OPSEC review prior to publishing or posting information in a public forum.”<sup>45</sup>

In the early stages of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, senior levels within the DOD were unaware of milblogging and it was therefore only loosely regulated.<sup>46</sup> As milblogging continued to grow, the rules became tighter as the military began to understand the potential negative consequences milblogs could have on OPSEC and operational maneuver.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> U.S. Secretary of Defense to All Department of Defense Activities, message 090426Z AUG 06, 09 August 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Leo Shane III, “Military Bloggers Speak Out Against More Restrictions,” *Stars and Stripes*, 24 April 2006, <http://www.estripes.com/articleprint.asp?section=104&article=35817&archive=true> (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Patience Wait, “Army Moves to Contain, Maybe Kill, Military Blogs,” *Government Computer News*, 3 May 2007, [http://www.gcn.com/online/vol1\\_no1/44203-1.html](http://www.gcn.com/online/vol1_no1/44203-1.html) (accessed 8 May 2007).

<sup>46</sup> John Hockenberry, “The Blogs of War,” *Wired.com*, [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.08/milblogs\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.08/milblogs_pr.html) (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>47</sup> DefenseTech.org, “Army ‘Big Brother’ Unit Targets Bloggers,” <http://www.defensetech.org/archives/002844.html> (accessed 25 April 2007).

### *Options For Military Commanders*

How should commanders handle milblogs? One option available to commanders favors terminating any milblog that has a negative tone toward the military. However, this method may have unintended consequences if the experience of the Edinburgh bookstore, Waterstone, provides any indication. As the first-ever blogger in Britain to be fired for his blog's content, Joe Gordon was "dismissed [from Waterstone in January 2005] without warning for gross misconduct and bringing the company into disrepute." His offense was that he "occasionally mentioned bad days at work and satirized his 'sandal-wearing' boss."<sup>48</sup> *The Guardian* (a major British newspaper) and DLegal (a leading British law firm) painted a negative picture of Waterstone as over-reacting and possibly exposing themselves to legal action.<sup>49</sup> A fairly obscure blog became a national media event and created negative public relations due to Waterstone's reaction to Mr. Gordon's blog.

In 2006, the military took a more moderate approach than Waterstone. Major Richard McNorton, Central Command (CENTCOM) Chief of Engagement Operations stated that his three-person team monitored blogs and milblogs about the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan in order to present bloggers who post inaccurate or incomplete information with CENTCOM's side of the story.<sup>50</sup> CENTCOM did not try to control what bloggers post, but rather provided links to CENTCOM's website and press releases so bloggers could present the full story.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Patrick Barkham, "Blogger Sacked For Sounding Off," *Guardian Unlimited*, 12 January 2005, <http://technology.guardian.co.uk/online/weblogs/story/0,14024,1388466,00.html> (accessed 23 April 2007).

<sup>49</sup> Richard Lawson, "UK Firms Warned Over Employees' Blogs," *Guardian Unlimited*, 13 January 2005, <http://technology.guardian.co.uk/online/weblogs/story/0,,1404243,00.html> (accessed 23 April 2007).

<sup>50</sup> Steve Alvarez, "CENTCOM Team Engages Bloggers," *US Fed News Service*, 2 March 2006, <http://proquest.umi.com/> (accessed 6 April 2007).

<sup>51</sup> William R. Levesque, "Blogs are CENTCOM's New Target," *St. Petersburg Times*, 12 February 2007, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/printdoc> (accessed 6 April 2007).

The team stated that they did not police milbloggers content and only contacted a milblogger's command if the team discovered classified material or OPSEC violations.<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, CENTCOM activated a 10-member Virginia Data Processing Unit from the Virginia National Guard to screen milblogs and other websites for OPSEC violations.<sup>53</sup> The team leader, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Warnock, stated that they were "not a law enforcement or intelligence agency, nor [were they] political correctness enforcers." They only educated milbloggers to the dangers of posting information that could possibly endanger U.S. service members' lives.<sup>54</sup> Pentagon spokesman Army Lieutenant Colonel Barry Venable summed up the military's philosophy concerning milblog monitoring by saying, "The bottom line is that the troops are citizens too, and enjoy the same rights as other Americans, albeit with proper attention paid to the constraints associated with official service."<sup>55</sup>

The CENTCOM measures came under attack as articles with titles such as "Blog and Get Busted,"<sup>56</sup> "Pentagon Moves Against Milbloggers,"<sup>57</sup> "Army 'Big Brother' Unit Targets Bloggers,"<sup>58</sup> "Blogs are CENTCOM's New Target,"<sup>59</sup> and "U.S. Military Declares War on

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<sup>52</sup> Alvarez, "CENTCOM Team Engages Bloggers"

<sup>53</sup> "Unit Monitors Web Sites, Blogs For Operational Security Issues," *National Guard* 60, no. 11 (November 2006): 41.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Michel, "Let Slip the Blogs of War," *United States Naval Institute Proceeding* 131, no. 3 (March 2005): 112.

<sup>56</sup> Christian Lowe, ed., "Blog, and Get Busted," *DefenseTech.org*, 10 September 2004, <http://www.defensetech.org/archives/001100.html> (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>57</sup> Mike Camey, "Pentagon Moves Against Milbloggers," *USAToday.com*, 24 October 2006, [http://blogs.usatoday.com/ondeadline/2006/10/pentagon\\_moves\\_.html](http://blogs.usatoday.com/ondeadline/2006/10/pentagon_moves_.html) (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>58</sup> DefenseTech.org, "Army 'Big Brother' Unit Targets Bloggers," <http://www.defensetech.org/archives/002844.html> (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>59</sup> William R. Levesque, "Blogs are CENTCOM's New Target," *St. Petersburg Times*, 12 February 2007, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/printdoc> (accessed 6 April 2007).

Blogs”<sup>60</sup> were published in the mainstream media. Some milbloggers and some in the press were saying the tightened rules and monitoring would “be the death of milblogging.”<sup>61</sup>

Some of the more popular milblogs were shutdown voluntarily because of concerns by the milbloggers that the new regulations were not worth the risk.<sup>62</sup> However, “others -- thousands of others -- continued on, trying to stay within the rules,” according to DefenseTech.org.<sup>63</sup> More were still being added to Milblogging.com’s roster as of April 2007.<sup>64</sup>

Subsequently, the U.S. Army AR 530-1 OPSEC regulation delineating the requirement for an OPSEC review of all milblogs was published in May 2007.<sup>65</sup> Almost immediately, a new set of articles was published in the mainstream media with similar titles and themes to those listed above. The milbloggers’ concern was over wording in the regulation that suggested each individual milblog entry required OPSEC officer review prior to posting.<sup>66</sup>

Since the new Army OPSEC regulation is less than one month old, it is still too early to tell if the new Army regulation will have a major impact on the number of milblogs online. The U.S. Army assesses it will not impact milblogs. In a fact sheet released shortly after the

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<sup>60</sup> Jules Cruttenden, “U.S. Military Declares War on Blogs,” *Boston Herald*, 22 October 2006, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/bostonherald/access/1149498431.html> (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Xenia Jardin, “Under Fire, Soldiers Kill Blogs,” *Wired.com*, 29 October 2006, <http://www.wired.com/print/politics/law/news/2006/10/72026> (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>63</sup> DefenseTech.org, “Army ‘Big Brother’ Unit Targets Bloggers,” <http://www.defensetech.org/archives/002844.html> (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>64</sup> Milblogging.com, “New Milblogs Added: March 13<sup>th</sup> - April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007,” Milblogging.com, blog entry posted 14 April 2007, <http://milblogging.com/> (accessed 26 April 2007).

<sup>65</sup> Patience Wait, “Army Moves to Contain, Maybe Kill, Military Blogs,” *Government Computer News*, 3 May 2007, [http://www.gcn.com/online/vol1\\_no1/44203-1.html](http://www.gcn.com/online/vol1_no1/44203-1.html) (accessed 8 May 2007).

<sup>66</sup> Patience Wait, “Army Moves to Contain, Maybe Kill, Military Blogs,” *Government Computer News*, 3 May 2007, [http://www.gcn.com/online/vol1\\_no1/44203-1.html](http://www.gcn.com/online/vol1_no1/44203-1.html) (accessed 8 May 2007).; Reuters, “U.S. Army Clamping Down on Soldier’s Blogs,” *Reuters.com*, 2 May 2007, [http://today.reuters.com/news/articlenews.aspx?type=domesticNews&storyid=2007-05-02T162957Z\\_01\\_N02339876\\_RTRUKOC\\_0\\_US-USA-ARMY-BLOGS.xml&src=rss&rpc=22](http://today.reuters.com/news/articlenews.aspx?type=domesticNews&storyid=2007-05-02T162957Z_01_N02339876_RTRUKOC_0_US-USA-ARMY-BLOGS.xml&src=rss&rpc=22) (accessed 6 May 2007).; Nikki Schwab, “Military Bloggers Wary of New Policy,” *WashingtonPost.com*, 5 May 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/05/AR2007050500881.html> (accessed 6 May 2007).; KVIA.com, “New Online Communication Rules Worry Soldiers, Families,” *kvia.com*, 3 May 2007, <http://www.kvia.com/Global/story.asp?S=6467874&nav=AbC0> (accessed 6 May 2007).

new OPSEC regulation was published, the Army clarified their stance on milblogs.<sup>67</sup> Army officials stated that after receiving milblog OPSEC “guidance and awareness training,” milbloggers will be responsible for ensuring OPSEC adherence in their milblogs. The Army stated it will not review every entry prior to publication. Essentially, the Army’s current stance is unchanged from previous regulations, according to the fact sheet.<sup>68</sup>

Milbloggers see what they do as vital to providing the public with an understanding of the military that only the service members on the front lines can provide.<sup>69</sup> The majority of the milblogging community is concerned about OPSEC in the war zone. In April 2006, 150 prominent milbloggers held the first ever Milblog Conference in Washington, D.C. One of the agenda items was a discussion on how to keep milblogging within the bounds of the DOD OPSEC guidelines while still having the freedom to write about topics that only a service member fighting on the front lines can provide to the American public.<sup>70</sup> Some milbloggers are making attempts to self-regulate the blogging community by publishing milblogging “rules of engagement” to ensure that milblogs do not cross the lines of classification, OPSEC, or good order and discipline in the services.<sup>71</sup> In April 2007, the group met again, receiving a video address from President Bush, thanking them “for all [they] do to support our troops, and their families, and the cause of freedom.”<sup>72</sup> General David Patraeus, Commander Multi-National Forces – Iraq, also passed his appreciation to the

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<sup>67</sup> Wired.com, “Army to Bloggers: We Won’t Bust You. Promise,” *Wired.com*, 3 May 2007, [http://blog.wired.com/defense/2007/05/army\\_to\\_blogger.html](http://blog.wired.com/defense/2007/05/army_to_blogger.html) (accessed 6 May 2007).

<sup>68</sup> David Axe, “Army’s Blog Rebuttal,” *Wired.com*, 3 May 2007, [http://blog.wired.com/defense/2007/05/armys\\_blog\\_rebu.html](http://blog.wired.com/defense/2007/05/armys_blog_rebu.html) (accessed 6 May 2007).

<sup>69</sup> Memmott, “‘Milbloggers’ are typing their place in history.”

<sup>70</sup> Milblog Conference Web site, “Purpose,” <http://www.militarywebcom.org/MilBlogConference/2/Purpose.html> (accessed 25 April 2007).; Leo Shane III, “Military Bloggers Speak Out Against More Restrictions,” *Stars and Stripes*, 24 April 2006, <http://www.estripes.com/articleprint.asp?section=104&article=35817&archive=true> (accessed 25 April 2007).

<sup>71</sup> Yankee Sailor, “Milblogger’s Rules of Engagement,” Yankee Sailor, blog entry posted 12 April 2007, <http://www.yankeesailor.us/?p=113> (accessed 20 April 2007).

<sup>72</sup> Milblogging.com, “Today’s Milvlog: President Bush Addresses 2007 Milblog Conference,” blog entry posted 6 May 2007, <http://www.milblogging.com/> (accessed 7 May 2007).

milblogging conference stating that he appreciates the “accurate description of the situation on the ground... in Iraq” when it is done in a way that “does not violate legitimate operational security guidelines.”<sup>73</sup>

Retired General Charles C. Krulak’s essay “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War” suggests that, in today’s environment, the actions of an individual service member can have a significant effect on the operational and strategic levels of war. Individual professional development, he concludes, is a key component to ensure service members are prepared to meet today’s challenges.<sup>74</sup> Although he was not talking specifically about milblogs and OPSEC training, this paper’s opening vignette is an excellent example of how milbloggers can become “strategic corporals.”

### ***Analysis***

Although there is a large number of milblogs on the Internet today, only a small percentage of these sites will influence public opinion. The issue facing the military commander is not the quantity of milblogs but rather the potential negative impact that even one milblog can have if the subject matter resonates with the public and press. Additionally, milblogs potentially can have devastating effects if OPSEC is violated.

However, the potential for milblogs to have an equally positive influence on public opinion should not be overlooked. A significant number of milblogs portray a positive image of the military. Many in the civilian sector use milblogs as their main source of information straight from the front lines. Milblogs provide a service for the military that other sources of

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<sup>73</sup> Blackfive.net, “The 2007 Milblog Conference – Flash Report,” blog entry posted 7 May 2007, <http://www.blackfive.net/> (accessed 8 May 2007).

<sup>74</sup> Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War,” *Marines Magazine*, January 1999.

news, either mainstream media or military press releases cannot provide. Milblogs present themselves as credible because they have a balance of positive and negative outlooks.

The commander must consider the service member's First Amendment right to freedom of speech and weigh OPSEC concerns prior to establishing milblog regulations and guidelines. Although the U.S. Supreme Court has given wide latitude to the military to determine the limits of its members' right to speak out, the Court has not completely removed that right. If commanders decide to limit a service member's right to free speech, they must ensure it is done in the context of operational security. Commanders must guard against any desire to shut down a milblog if the only offense is that the milblogger has a negative view of the service.

Although some in the milblogger community have taken exception to DOD's tightening of control on milblogs, only a small percentage of milblogs have voluntarily shutdown due to the new requirements. With the number of active milblogs remaining relatively high and new milblogs being added each day, one could argue that the military has not overly burdened the milblogging community to the extent that free speech is being stifled.

Most milbloggers want to work within the OPSEC guidelines, but they want to be able to strike a balance with their ability to tell their stories. Some in the milblogging community have attempted to "self-police" through milblogging rules of engagement and other means. The military can play a role by providing quality training for milbloggers to ensure they understand exactly how to work within the OPSEC guidelines while still having the ability to write the kinds of colorful stories that draw readers.

## ***Recommendations and Conclusion***

Although OPSEC concerns are paramount to commanders' decisions to allow milblogs in their commands, they should not discount the positive influence milblogs can have on highlighting military successes not reported by the media. Military leaders must allow a permissive military web log environment, framed with sound operational security guidance and training, if they are to leverage the benefits that military web logs can provide to the operational commander.

Excessively restricting or banning milblogs based solely on OPSEC concerns prevents the positive exposure that milblogs bring to the military and its operations. Commanders should enable personnel to write milblogs that allow the American public and mainstream media to hear first-hand accounts and see positive aspects of operations that would otherwise go unreported. Training and clear guidelines can mitigate OPSEC risks to mission and personnel.

OPSEC regulations need to account for the audience and clearly state the intentions. Instructions such as the Army's latest OPSEC directive give milbloggers the impression that every entry must be cleared with the chain-of-command prior to posting on the Internet. This is impractical, given the number of milblogs and the frequency of updates of those milblogs paired with the number of OPSEC officers available to screen them. If this policy was literally enforced, it would cause a backlog in milblog entries that would render their unique qualities worthless – namely, unfiltered information from the front lines provided instantaneously.

The confusion that accompanied the release of the instruction and the subsequent requirement for a fact sheet explaining what the Army meant to say could have been avoided.

Most milbloggers want to work within the guidelines of good OPSEC, but when the boundaries are unclear, it is difficult for them to do so. A sound OPSEC training program directly related to milblogs should be provided to all military personnel who start a milblog website.

The U.S. Supreme Court gives the military much latitude when weighing First Amendment rights against the mission because they understand the unique nature of military operations. When developing a milblog policy, commanders must consider the individual's right to freedom of speech and weigh it against the solemn duty to protect the mission and people charged to their command.

When commanders allow their personnel to write freely (within OPSEC guidelines) about their wartime views they risk the publication of negative messages about the military. As shown in this paper, this risk is necessary if the military is going to be able to leverage the positive aspects of milblogging. The public and press appreciate the unpolished viewpoints of milbloggers and, for the most part, those viewpoints reflect positively on the military. Negative entries provide credibility to the positive ones because they provide evidence that the writers are free to express their true thoughts.

As Senators Norm Coleman (R-MN), Tom Coburn (R-OK), and Jim DeMint (R-SC) stated in their May 4, 2007 letter to Defense Secretary Robert Gates, "the American people have benefited greatly from direct correspondence with the men and women in uniform serving abroad via military blogs."<sup>75</sup>

Commanders must ensure that milblog OPSEC vulnerabilities are thoroughly addressed and highlighted in training. An OPSEC violation in a milblog can have devastating effects on

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<sup>75</sup> Senator Norm Coleman, Senator Tom Coburn, and Senator Jim DeMint to Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, letter, 4 May 2007.

operations. However, commanders must also consider the positive message that milblogs can provide to the public and media when deciding on a milblog policy for their commands.

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